

How do we know Jesus is the Son of God?

By Jim Denison

"Jesus is Lord." This is the central affirmation of the Christian faith. Its Greek original is found scrawled on walls in the Roman catacombs and at the heart of the most ancient formulations of faith. When the Empire forced Christians to say "Caesar is Lord" or die, believers by the multiplied thousands chose to die. If presented the same option, we should make the same choice. Why?

In recent years it has become popular to claim that Jesus of Nazareth saw himself only as a religious teacher, and that the Church deified him over the centuries. Not according to the eyewitnesses. When Jesus stood on trial for his life, the high priest challenged him: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26:63). His answer sealed his fate: "Yes, it is as you say" (v. 64). Earlier he told his opponents, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). He clearly claimed to be God.

And his first followers accepted his claim to be true. Peter and the other apostles refused to stop preaching that Jesus is Lord, even when threatened with their lives (cf. Acts 5:29-32). Each but John was martyred for his faith in Christ, and John was exiled to the prison island of Patmos for preaching the Lordship of Jesus. Billions of people across twenty centuries have accepted their truth claims and followed their Lord as God.

How do we know he was right?

Here is the rope from which Christianity swings: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:13-15). Before Easter, the disciples assumed their leader was dead and gone. After that day, they were transfused with divine courage and set about winning the world to Jesus. The resurrection was the basis for their commitment to Christ as Lord. It is ours as well.

We know Jesus existed, and was crucified at the hands of Pontius Pilate. We know that the first Christians believed him to be raised from the dead (cf. the letter of Pliny the Younger, the descriptions of Josephus). But believing doesn't make it so. Is there objective evidence for their faith in a risen Savior?

David Hume was an 18th-century Scottish philosopher, known today as the "Father of Skepticism." He made it his life's work to debunk assumptions which he considered to be unprovable, among them the veracity of miracles. He argued for six criteria by which we should judge those who claim to have witnessed a miracle: they should be numerous, intelligent, educated, of unquestioned integrity, willing to undergo severe loss if proven wrong, and their claims should be capable of easy validation (David Hume, *An Enquiry*

Concerning Human Understanding). Each is appropriate for determining the truthfulness of a witness. How do the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ fare by such standards?

They were *numerous*: over 500 saw the resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 15:6). They were *intelligent* and *well-educated*, as the literature they produced makes clear (the Acts 4:13 claim that they were "unschooled, ordinary men" meant only that they had not attended rabbinic schools). Paul was in fact trained by Gamaliel, the finest scholar in Judaism (Acts 22:3). They were men and women of *unquestioned integrity*, clearly *willing to undergo severe loss*, as proven by their martyrdoms. And their claims were *easily validated*, as witnessed by the empty tomb (cf. Acts 26:26, "this thing was not done in a corner").

So the witnesses were credible. What of the objective evidence for their claims? It is a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and buried, and that on the third day his tomb was found empty. Skeptics have struggled to explain the empty tomb ever since.

Three strategies center on theft. The first was to claim that while the guards slept, the disciples stole the body (Matthew 28:11-15). How would sleeping guards know the identity of such thieves? How could the disciples convince 500 people that the corpse was alive? And why would these disciples then die for what they knew to be a lie? A second approach claims that the women stole the body. How would they overpower the guards? How would they make a corpse look alive? Why would they suffer and die for such fabrication? A third explanation is that the authorities stole the body. When the misguided disciples found an empty tomb, they announced a risen Lord. But why would the authorities steal the body they had positioned guards to watch? And when the Christians began preaching the resurrection, wouldn't they quickly produce the corpse?

A fourth approach is the wrong tomb theory—the grief-stricken women and apostles went to the wrong tomb, found it empty, and began announcing Easter. But the women saw where he was buried (Matthew 27:61); Joseph of Arimathea would have corrected the error (Matthew 27:57-61); and the authorities would have gone to the correct tomb and produced the corpse.

A fifth strategy is the "swoon theory"—Jesus did not actually die on the cross. He or his followers bribed the medical examiner to pronounce him dead, then he revived in the tomb and appeared to be resurrected. But how could he survive burial clothes which cut off all air? How could he shove aside the stone and overpower the guards? How could he appear through walls (John 20:19, 26) and ascend to heaven (Acts 1:9)?

Conclusion

There is only one reasonable explanation for the empty tomb, the changed lives of the disciples, and the overnight explosion of the Christian movement upon the world stage: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He is therefore the person he claimed to be: our Lord and God. Trusting him is not a leap into the dark, but into the light. When you jump, crucified hands will catch you and never let you go (John 10:28).